

The Nine Mile Walk

by Harry Kemelman (1908-1996)

I HAD MADE an ass of myself in a speech I had given at the Good Government Association dinner, and Nicky Welt had cornered me at breakfast at the Blue Moon, where we both ate occasionally, for the pleasure of rubbing it in. I had made the mistake of departing from my prepared speech to criticize a statement my predecessor in the office of County Attorney had made to the press. I had drawn a number of inferences from his statement and had thus left myself open to a rebuttal which he had promptly made and which had the effect of making me appear intellectually dishonest. I was new to this political game, having but a few months before left the Law School faculty to become the Reform Party candidate for County Attorney. I said as much in extenuation, but Nicholas Welt, who could never drop his pedagogical manner (he was Snowdon Professor of English Language and Literature), replied in much the same tone that he would dismiss a request from a sophomore for an extension on a term paper, "That's no excuse."

Although he is only two or three years older than I, in his late forties, he always treats me like a schoolmaster hectoring a stupid pupil. And I, perhaps because he looks so much older with his white hair and lined, gnomelike face, suffer it.

"They were perfectly logical inferences," I pleaded.

"My dear boy," he purred, "although human intercourse is well-nigh impossible without inference, most inferences are usually wrong. The percentage of error is particularly high in the legal profession where the intention is not to discover what the speaker wishes to convey, but rather what he wishes to conceal."

I picked up my check and eased out from behind the table.

"I suppose you are referring to cross-examination of witnesses in court. Well, there's always an opposing counsel who will object if the inference is illogical."

"Who said anything about logic?" he retorted. "An inference can be logical and still not be true."

He followed me down the aisle to the cashier's booth. I paid my check and waited impatiently while he searched in an old-fashioned change purse, fishing out coins one by one and placing them on the counter beside his check, only to discover that the

total was insufficient. He slid them back into his purse and with a tiny sigh extracted a bill from another compartment of the purse and handed it to the cashier.

“Give me any sentence of ten or twelve words,” he said, “and I’ll build you a logical chain of inferences that you never dreamed of when you framed the sentence.”

Other customers were coming in, and since the space in front of the cashier’s booth was small, I decided to wait outside until Nicky completed his transaction with the cashier. I remember being mildly amused at the idea that he probably thought I was still at his elbow and was going right ahead with his discourse.

When he joined me on the sidewalk I said, “A nine mile walk is no joke, especially in the rain.”

“No, I shouldn’t think it would be,” he agreed absently. Then he stopped in his stride and looked at me sharply. “What the devil are you talking about?”

“It’s a sentence and it has eleven words,” I insisted. And I repeated the sentence, ticking off the words on my fingers.

“What about it?”

“You said that given a sentence of ten or twelve words—”

“Oh, yes.” He looked at me suspiciously. “Where did you get it?”

“It just popped into my head. Come on now, build your inferences.”

“You’re serious about this?” he asked, his little blue eyes glittering with amusement. “You really want me to?”

It was just like him to issue a challenge and then to appear amused when I accepted it. And it made me angry.

“Put up or shut up,” I said.

“All right,” he said mildly. “No need to be huffy. I’ll play. Hmm, let me see, how did the sentence go? ‘A nine mile walk is no joke, especially in the rain.’ Not much to go on there.”

“It’s more than ten words,” I rejoined.

“Very well.” His voice became crisp as he mentally squared off to the problem. “First inference: the speaker is aggrieved.”

“I’ll grant that,” I said, “although it hardly seems to be an inference. It’s really implicit in the statement.”

He nodded impatiently. “Next inference: the rain was unforeseen, otherwise he would have said, ‘A nine mile walk in the rain is no joke,’ instead of using the ‘especially’ phrase as an afterthought.”

“I’ll allow that,” I said, “although it’s pretty obvious.”

“First inferences should be obvious,” said Nicky tartly.

I let it go at that. He seemed to be floundering and I didn't want to rub it in.

"Next inference: the speaker is not an athlete or an outdoors man."

"You'll have to explain that one," I said.

"It's the 'especially' phrase again," he said. "The speaker does not say that a nine mile walk in the rain is no joke, but merely the walk—just the distance, mind you—is no joke. Now, nine miles is not such a terribly long distance. You walk more than half that in eighteen holes of golf—and golf is an old man's game," he added slyly. *I play golf.*

"Well, that would be all right under ordinary circumstances," I said, "but there are other possibilities. The speaker might be a soldier in the jungle, in which case nine miles would be a pretty good hike, rain or no rain."

"Yes," and Nicky was sarcastic, "and the speaker might be one-legged. For that matter, the speaker might be a graduate student writing a Ph.D. thesis on humor and starting by listing all the things that are not funny. See here, I'll have to make a couple of assumptions before I continue."

"How do you mean?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Remember, I'm taking this sentence in *vacuo*, as it were. I don't know who said it or what the occasion was. Normally a sentence belongs in the framework of a situation."

"I see. What assumptions do you want to make?"

"For one thing, I want to assume that the intention was not frivolous, that the speaker is referring to a walk that was actually taken, and that the purpose of the walk was not to win a bet or something of that sort."

"That seems reasonable enough," I said.

"And I also want to assume that the locale of the walk is here."

"You mean here in Fairfield?"

"Not necessarily. I mean in this general section of the country."

"Fair enough."

"Then, if you grant those assumptions, you'll have to accept my last inference that the speaker is no athlete or outdoors man."

"Well, all right, go on."

"Then my next inference is that the walk was taken very late at night or very early in the morning—say, between midnight and five or six in the morning."

"How do you figure that one?" I asked.

“Consider the distance, nine miles. We’re in a fairly well-populated section. Take any road and you’ll find a community of some sort in less than nine miles. Hadley is five miles away, Hadley Falls is seven and a half, Goreton is eleven, but East Goreton is only eight and you strike East Goreton before you come to Goreton. There is local train service along the Goreton road and bus service along the others. All the highways are pretty well traveled. Would anyone have to walk nine miles in a rain unless it were late at night when no buses or trains were running and when the few automobiles that were out would hesitate to pick up a stranger on the highway?”

“He might not have wanted to be seen,” I suggested.

Nicky smiled pityingly. “You think he would be less noticeable trudging along the highway than he would be riding in a public conveyance where everyone is usually absorbed in his newspaper?”

“Well, I won’t press the point,” I said brusquely.

“Then try this one: he was walking toward a town rather than away from one.”

I nodded. “It is more likely, I suppose. If he were in a town, he could probably arrange for some sort of transportation. Is that the basis for your inference?”

“Partly that,” said Nicky, “but there is also an inference to be drawn from the distance. Remember, it’s a nine mile walk and nine is one of the exact numbers.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

That exasperated schoolteacher-look appeared on Nicky’s face again. “Suppose you say, ‘I took a ten mile walk’ or ‘a hundred mile drive’; I would assume that you actually walked anywhere from eight to a dozen miles, or that you rode between ninety and a hundred and ten miles. In other words, *ten* and *hundred* are round numbers. You might have walked *exactly* ten miles or just as likely you might have walked *approximately* ten miles. But when you speak of walking *nine* miles, I have a right to assume that you have named an exact figure. Now, we are far more likely to know the distance of the city from a given point than we are to know the distance of a given point from the city. That is, ask anyone in the city how far out Farmer Brown lives, and if he knows him, he will say, ‘Three or four miles.’ But ask Farmer Brown how far he lives from the city and he will tell you ‘Three and six-tenths miles—measured it on my speedometer many a time.’”

“It’s weak, Nicky,” I said.

“But in conjunction with your own suggestion that he could have arranged transportation if he had been in a city—”

“Yes, that would do it,” I said. “I’ll pass it. Any more?”

“I’ve just begun to hit my stride,” he boasted. “My next inference is that he was going to a definite destination and that he had to be there at a particular time. It was not a case of going off to get help because his car broke down or his wife was going to have a baby or somebody was trying to break into his house.”

“Oh, come now,” I said, “the car breaking down is really the most likely situation. He could have known the exact distance from having checked the mileage just as he was leaving the town.”

Nicky shook his head. “Rather than walk nine miles in the rain, he would have curled up on the back seat and gone to sleep, or at least stayed by his car and tried to flag another motorist. Remember, it’s nine miles. What would be the least it would take him to hike it?”

“Four hours,” I offered.

He nodded. “Certainly no less, considering the rain. We’ve agreed that it happened very late at night or very early in the morning. Suppose he had his breakdown at one o’clock in the morning. It would be five o’clock before he would arrive. That’s daybreak. You begin to see a lot of cars on the road. The buses start just a little later. In fact, the first buses hit Fairfield around five-thirty. Besides, if he were going for help, he would not have to go all the way to town—only as far as the nearest telephone. No, he had a definite appointment, and it was in a town, and it was for some time before five-thirty.”

“Then why couldn’t he have got there earlier and waited?” I asked. “He could have taken the last bus, arrived around one o’clock, and waited until his appointment. He walks nine miles in the rain instead, and you said he was no athlete.”

We had arrived at the Municipal Building where my office is. Normally, any arguments begun at the Blue Moon ended at the entrance to the Municipal Building. But I was interested in Nicky’s demonstration and I suggested that he come up for a few minutes.

When we were seated I said, “How about it, Nicky, why couldn’t he have arrived early and waited?”

“He could have,” Nicky retorted. “But since he did not, we must assume that he was either detained until after the last bus left, or that he had to wait where he was for a signal of some sort, perhaps a telephone call.”

“Then according to you, he had an appointment some time between midnight and five-thirty—”

“We can draw it much finer than that. Remember, it takes him four hours to walk the distance. The last bus stops at twelve-thirty A.M. If he doesn’t take that, but starts at the same time, he won’t arrive at his destination until four-thirty. On the other hand, if he takes the first bus in the morning, he will arrive around five-thirty. That would mean that his appointment was for some time between four-thirty and five-thirty.”

“You mean that if his appointment was earlier than four-thirty, he would have taken the last night bus, and if it was later than five-thirty, he would have taken the first morning bus?”

“Precisely. And another thing: if he was waiting for a signal or a phone call, it must have come not much later than one o’clock.”

“Yes, I see that,” I said. “If his appointment is around five o’clock and it takes him four hours to walk the distance, he’d have to start around one.”

He nodded, silent and thoughtful. For some queer reason I could not explain, I did not feel like interrupting his thoughts. On the wall was a large map of the county and I walked over to it and began to study it.

“You’re right, Nicky,” I remarked over my shoulder, “there’s no place as far as nine miles away from Fairfield that doesn’t hit another town first. Fairfield is right in the middle of a bunch of smaller towns.”

He joined me at the map. “It doesn’t have to be Fairfield, you know,” he said quietly. “It was probably one of the outlying towns he had to reach. Try Hadley.”

“Why Hadley? What would anyone want in Hadley at five o’clock in the morning?”

“The Washington Flyer stops there to take on water about that time,” he said quietly.

“That’s right, too,” I said. “I’ve heard that train many a night when I couldn’t sleep. I’d hear it pulling in and then a minute or two later I’d hear the clock on the Methodist Church banging out five.” I went back to my desk for a timetable. “The Flyer leaves Washington at twelve forty-seven A.M. and gets into Boston at eight A.M.”

Nicky was still at the map measuring distances with a pencil.

“Exactly nine miles from Hadley is the Old Sumter Inn,” he announced.

“Old Sumter Inn,” I echoed. “But that upsets the whole

theory. You can arrange for transportation there as easily as you can in a town.”

He shook his head. “The cars are kept in an enclosure and you have to get an attendant to check you through the gate. The attendant would remember anyone taking out his car at a strange hour. It’s a pretty conservative place. He could have waited in his room until he got a call from Washington about someone on the Flyer—maybe the number of the car and the berth. Then he could just slip out of the hotel and walk to Hadley.”

I stared at him, hypnotized.

“It wouldn’t be difficult to slip aboard while the train was taking on water, and then if he knew the car number and the berth—”

“Nicky,” I said portentously, “as the Reform District Attorney who campaigned on an economy program, I am going to waste the taxpayers’ money and call Boston long distance. It’s ridiculous, it’s insane—but I’m going to do it!”

His little blue eyes glittered and he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“Go ahead,” he said hoarsely.

I REPLACED THE telephone in its cradle.

“Nicky,” I said, “this is probably the most remarkable coincidence in the history of criminal investigation: *a man was found murdered in his berth on last night’s twelve-forty-seven from Washington!* He’d been dead about three hours, which would make it exactly right for Hadley.”

“I thought it was something like that,” said Nicky. “But you’re wrong about its being a coincidence. It can’t be. Where did you get that sentence?”

“It was just a sentence. It simply popped into my head.”

“It couldn’t have! It’s not the sort of sentence that pops into one’s head. If you had taught composition as long as I have, you’d know that when you ask someone for a sentence of ten words or so, you get an ordinary statement such as ‘I like milk’—with the other words made up by a modifying clause like, ‘because it is good for my health.’ The sentence you offered related to a *particular situation*.”

“But I tell you I talked to no one this morning. And I was alone with you at the Blue Moon.”

“You weren’t with me all the time I paid my check,” he said sharply. “Did you meet anyone while you were waiting on the sidewalk for me to come out of the Blue Moon?”

I shook my head. "I was outside for less than a minute before you joined me. You see, a couple of men came in while you were digging out your change and one of them bumped me, so I thought I'd wait—"

"Did you ever see them before?"

"Who?"

"The two men who came in," he said, the note of exasperation creeping into his voice again.

"Why, no—they weren't anyone I knew."

"Were they talking?"

"I guess so. Yes, they were. Quite absorbed in their conversation, as a matter of fact—otherwise, they would have noticed me and I would not have been bumped."

"Not many strangers come into the Blue Moon," he remarked.

"Do you think it was they?" I asked eagerly. "I think I'd know them again if I saw them."

Nicky's eyes narrowed. "It's possible. There had to be two—one to trail the victim in Washington and ascertain his berth number, the other to wait here and do the job. The Washington man would be likely to come down here afterwards. If there was theft as well as murder, it would be to divide the spoils. If it was just murder, he would probably have to come down to pay off his confederate."

I reached for the telephone.

"We've been gone less than half an hour," Nicky went on. "They were just coming in and service is slow at the Blue Moon. The one who walked all the way to Hadley must certainly be hungry and the other probably drove all night from Washington."

"Call me immediately if you make an arrest," I said into the phone and hung up.

Neither of us spoke a word while we waited. We paced the floor, avoiding each other almost as though we had done something we were ashamed of.

The telephone rang at last. I picked it up and listened. Then I said, "O.K." and turned to Nicky.

"One of them tried to escape through the kitchen but Winn had someone stationed at the back and they got him."

"That would seem to prove it," said Nicky with a frosty little smile.

I nodded agreement.

He glanced at his watch. "Gracious," he exclaimed, "I wanted to make an early start on my work this morning, and here

I've already wasted all this time talking with you."

I let him get to the door. "Oh, Nicky," I called, "what was it you set out to prove?"

"That a chain of inferences could be logical and still not be true," he said.

"Oh."

"What are you laughing at?" he asked snappishly. And then he laughed too.